The World of Foreign Books

CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN FRANCE.

Surveyed By A. G. H. SPIERS.

Georges Duhamel and the Literature of Childhood.

Never more shalt thou open a door with a rush; there may be a little man crouching behind it.

Thou shalt measure thy gestures and restrain thy motions. Less fire and more strength.

Thou shalt less often lift thine eyes to the heavens; thou shalt ceaselessly look down at thy feet that thou mayest not walk upon thy little folk.

Thou shalt no more shut drawers with a push of thy knee: little hands slip in everywhere. Thou shalt do all things with deliberation, carefully.

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Thou shalt never more light a fire without reflecting that fire burns. Thou shalt never more put thy teacup on the edge of tables. Thou shalt extinguish cigarette butts with particular care.

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Thou shalt number silence in the daytime among things accidental, yea, well nigh mythical.

Thou shalt no more say, with the proud certainty of former times: "On such a day I shall do thus or so." Thou shalt pin many a "perhaps" upon the wings of thy projects."

Such is the amiable version of the ten commandments appearing in "les Plaisirs et les Jeux" ("The Lover of the Child, His Book"), Duhamel's recent book about children.

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SOME time ago I had occasion in these columns to remark upon the richness of contemporary France in child literature. France is the country which a century before Grimm collected the fairy tales which are most appreciated to-day: Puss in Boots, Hop o' My Thumb, Cinderella. France, too, is the country of Mother Goose. It is also the country that is richest in children's songs—those songs the tunes of which have been borrowed by the public schools of our own country to-day. It is perhaps natural, therefore, that we should find in this same country which has supplied the child with so much pleasure the most remarkable blossoming of works having as their subject the study of the child.

France has produced in the last thirty or forty years a remarkable variety of such writings. The child is studied from a dozen different angles. One author sees in the child a creature of imagination and sentiment (the child of Anatole France's "Petit Pierre," for instance). Another author, such as Charles Louis Philippe, depicts with much tenderness the child's need of sympathy and affection. A third, Lichtenberger, uses a child's ingenuous integrity as a foil for the grimaces of the artificial society of his elders. A fourth, like Pierre Mille, takes pleasure in setting the child up as a different being from the man: he stresses the differences and comments on the similarities between them. Still a fifth regards the child not at all as the young of man but in and for himself a being full of impulses which it is entirely foreign to his purpose to consider in their relations to society as pleasant or unpleasant as virtues or vices.

"Les Plaisirs et les Jeux" studies the child from a yet different angle. The solicitude, the smiling self surrender, the simple sympathy of the decalogue quoted above, are typical of Duhamel as his preceding works have revealed him to us. They were to be expected from the author of "La Possession du Monde." As early as 1912 we find in one of his essays on poetry the idea that the most constant, unfailing interest for man is man and nature, or rather man in nature. It is this same idea which had already appeared in a somewhat disconcerting volume of verse entitled "Compagnons," in which the author shows himself willing to abandon other interests for a share in the feelings and thoughts of his fellow men. It is the same idea, or better, the same peculiar human sympathy which, so simply and so unostentatiously, creates the charm of those two volumes of war stories which first made Duhamel known to the general public, "La Vie des Martyrs" and "Civilisation." "La Possession du Monde" put the author's temperamental characteristics into tangible form. In this volume of essays (to be read in the original and not in the inadequate English translation) Duhamel rebels against a too rational, too calculating attitude toward the universe. Like not a few other Frenchmen of his generation, he seeks to open up the springs of joy in living. His book aims at nothing less than a reeducation of the heart: it is an effort to teach man to recapture his happiness in the most natural, long neglected sources, viz., a deep and warm interest in his fellow men and a direct, lyric contact with the simpler beauties of nature. For life, according to Duhamel, has become too sophisticated, too mechanical, too much a matter of thought. "That which characterizes the intelligence," he writes in one place, "is a complete lack of understanding of life." There is an echo of this in the present volume. Duhamel, having taken down from his shelves all the well known authors who have theorized upon the bringing up of children, Rabelais, Montaigne, Fenelon, Locke, Rousseau, Pasquier, &c., is struck with the divergence of their views. From all this theorizing he turns to good, practical, affectionate living. "I replace all my books on the shelves of my library and meditate on the humble wisdom of maman Ma: 'With children you do as best you can.'" And this best was, in her case at least, very good, no doubt, for this "maman Ma" is the warm hearted grandmother, the author's mother, she who, when her brood had grown up and scattered, once exclaimed: "I wish we could all sleep together, so that I might hear, at least at night, all of you breathing around me."

II.

In Duhamel's attitude there is little that is mystic; still less that smacks of science; and only a little more that is humanistic. He does not see in man the chosen vessel sheltering a hidden power; he does not study him in order to add to the sum of human knowledge; nor yet is he impressed with the eminent dignity of man and the splendor of his abilities and nature. Duhamel is more subjective than this. He is not so much an admirer as an enthusiast; he is more fervent than discriminating. He is one who possesses warmth of heart, and believes in it. "Les Plaisirs et les Jeux" if translated into English might very properly, as I have already suggested, be published under the title: "The Lover of the Child, His Book." It is the work of one who delights in children, who enjoys watching them, who revels in their invasion of his life, and who finds no subterfuges necessary to make them interesting: he will build no striking stories as a vehicle for his observations. Even where the children are not directly concerned, their influence is everywhere felt. "Durtain, pointing out his wife, says to me with a smile: 'We are related, my wife and I—related through our children.' He is right and I quote his remark to Blanche (evidently the speaker's wife): She thinks a moment, then comments: 'To be relatives is something! But it is not bad to be friends in addition!'"

Duhamel's warmth of heart is a magic light picking out and making attractive many a peculiarity of the child, which ordinarily escapes any but a mother's eye. "He lives so close to the ground that he perceives a thousand tiny things which we giants do not see: small stones, crumbs of bread, bits of thread, straws. . . . He goes here and there, like a hen; stops, bobs forward, seizes delicately with his chubby little fingers, this microscopic prey—and swallows it. He puts down on the ground whatever he has in his hands: the earth is his natural table. . . . The little man does not need the gymnastic artifices (of grown ups to reach the earth). The earth is close at hand. He touches it in a friendly manner, by a mere inclination of his back, with his fat legs held straight. He falls forward on all fours with a graceful ease, like a young bear when the trainer permits it to resume its normal position."

Many times Duhamel's feeling enables him to go further. Not only does it permit

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